

Amazonian shamanism and the Western world: between encouragement and warning

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The "Shamanic" Invasion

In the small haven of the High Peruvian Amazon where I have lived for almost 20 years, I am seeing a growing wave of Westerners eager to approach the practices of traditional Amazonian medicine. Having myself been one of the initiators of this movement, I cannot help but oscillate between satisfaction and fear in the face of this enthusiasm for what is now known as "shamanism"; a very inappropriate term from an anthropological perspective. The progressive realization that Westerners have of the serious deficiency of sacredness in their everyday lives, and the audacity of some, take them to the other side of the world in search of a renewal of their spirituality that seems to bring hope. At the same time, the Westerners' capacity to transform everything they touch into a commercial product, including spirituality, has something terrifying to it. We are currently witnessing a massive landing of people from countries in the North of the world coming to the most isolated corners of the forests, mountains and deserts of Peru, and to many other places, to discover the "shaman" that is still "pure", and who can reconcile them with themselves. It is here that things get complicated in a particular way, after the movement began in the opposite direction with the shifting of "shamans" to Europe, and white people presenting themselves as initiated and capable of substituting indigenous teachers.

When a Westerner and an Amazonian or Mestizo shaman meet, it is not just two people coming face to face, it is two cultures discovering each other, and finally, confronting each other. Each one carries, though often unconsciously, the cultural elements that structure their world, their thoughts and behavior. If this is true for the rules of education and courtesy in everyday life when you pass a geographic border, it is even more valid at the point of crossing the borders of states of consciousness. This mutual ignorance of the internal world of the other, heightened by the illusion of appearances (many shamans dress in a Western way, wear a watch, listen to the radio...), allows for multiple projections that become permanent sources of misunderstanding, from the most humorous to the most dangerous.

The symbolic universe of reference of one and the other are completely different, and nonetheless, it is precisely this reading key of inner experiences that will be in play during shamanic experiences like drinking Ayahuasca. If our Western traveler has not even a little bit of training in the symbolism of their own culture (this is the rule) then there is a great risk of mistaking fireflies for lanterns, charlatans for great teachers, and personal visions for universal revelations. The capacity for self-illusion is such that, facing the stakes and the investments made in such an approach, the recipient has no remedy available that can warn them about their own naivety, when they want to listen to their "teacher" that tells them that they are now part of the "initiated ones".

¹ SYNODIE Magazine, Being on the Path Together, "The Transpersonal?", Groups of Investigation and Studies in Transpersonal Therapies (GRETT) Ed. summer 2005, pp. 26-31, printed in Romania, 2005.

Therefore, the question arises for a Western subject as to how to manage the shamanic experience, in order to obtain real benefit and to not contribute to the fast degradation of these practices in traditional societies. At the risk of sounding simplistic with this brief article, I propose some key elements, like some sort of travel guide, in an attempt to point out bridges, dangerous paths and the ones without problems.

When a Westerner encounters an indigenous shaman

Amazonian shamanic practices come from a tribal world principally regulated by the founding myth of Justice. For an indigenous person, their ethnic group consists of a universe of reference. Life is maintained by a rule of reciprocity with the external world, with the jungle, with the other tribes and with the invisible world. The group is extremely structured, with precise and rigid life norms, an undeniable hierarchy in which the survival of the group has priority over the life of an individual. All evil phenomena are due to an imbalance in these relations with the “other”, because of aggressions or transgressions, and must be immediately re-established by the reciprocity of the aggression or the punishment of the transgression in accordance with the saying “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” of the Jewish tribes. As such, it is a “warrior” world where the shaman is above all a fighter in the interior of the invisible world. He must be stronger than his external opponent (the shaman of the other tribe) and as such must accumulate the largest number of weapons.

On the contrary, our Western Greek-Judeo-Christian upbringing positions us in a completely different referential universe where the myth of Love is the foundation. That is to say that the “other” has to become a brother and not an enemy, since the real enemy is inside of ourselves. It is no longer possible to idealistically project evil onto another person. This gives rise to the concept of the individual, of an internal place where I have to become aware of myself (individuation). Whatever the aggression that might have arisen from the outside, this sends me back to my way of processing it, and thus, my own conduct. I do not have to charge myself with weapons but rather strip myself of my ego, clean myself and renounce my ambition of omnipotence. Universalization becomes the field of our action and our thought, regularly taking us to project over the “other” our own way of being in the world and encourages the globalization of our values. The individual is defined as the supreme purpose of the society in the upbringing of Western countries.

This collective psychic ground induces Westerners to project onto a shaman their cultural ideal of a teacher who is stripped of himself and living in perfect harmony with nature, in love and peace. The Westerner fantasizes about a liberated indigenous person with a generous nature who at the same time will be, without a doubt, incapable of tolerating the extreme social limitations and hierarchies of the ethnic groups, the overwhelming power of nature and the often-threatening influence of the invisible world. In the shaman, they see a man who has completed a tremendous work on himself and who has defeated his internal demons: a mix of Rousseau’s “noble savage” and an “illuminated” Oriental. An indigenous man can turn into an expert in the use of the invisible forces of nature and of our human nature, without having done even minimal work on himself, essentially having accumulated in his body the energetic weapons necessary to combat the “other”. In other words, we might have to face a great sorcerer: a powerful man who does not control all of his selfish impulses. This is precisely the reason why the majority of shamans are feared by their families, for this sudden change in an aggressive sense is always possible. Some ethnic groups have come to exert extreme control over their shamans, whom are always susceptible of being eliminated in case of suspicious events that may arise in the tribe (death, illness, bad luck...). For this reason, many young indigenous people refuse shamanic apprenticeships, as they know the high levels of demand that this implies until death, as well as the exposure to being “hated all their life”.

Our everyday contact with Amazonian curanderos shows us a permanent universe of internal wars, aggressive projections, efficient warlike actions in the invisible. The “magical” dimension can have different degrees of importance, however is rarely purified by contemporary healers. Our ignorant Westerner naively advances in the middle of a battleground where it is very easy to be hit by a lost “dart”! Facing this extremely active world of witchcraft, many Westerners believe they are protected because “they do not believe”. Nonetheless, they would laugh at indigenous person that tells them that they are protected against a virus or bacteria, simply

because they do not believe in it. Without a doubt, the act of believing, in one context like another (placebos, the power of suggestion...), can facilitate some control, but denial does not in any way guarantee absolute protection.

These statements tend to interfere with the simplistic *New Age* atmosphere, in which one would like to believe that “everything in the world is beautiful, everyone is friendly”. As such, these field observations are regularly rejected before even being considered.

The blind spot of the right side of the brain

Just as Westerners have developed the psychic functions of the left side of the brain in extraordinary ways, the ethnic groups of the Amazon are experts in the use of the psychic function of the right side, which within us are underutilized. Western ignorance in this matter can be put on the same level as the ignorance that the average Amazonian Native would demonstrate with regards to quantum physics or Germanic philosophy. So, there we have a great shaman that demonstrates his art to be extraordinarily efficient, but is completely incapable of explaining it with words in a linear explanatory style. Despite the fact that the right hemisphere of his brain is so well trained, this does not give him automatic access to discursive rational logic. On the contrary, who does not know a great Western erudite who is understood only by colleagues of their discipline throughout the world, but is completely incapable of managing their symbolic, emotional life, interpreting their dreams, analogically exposing their knowledge or understanding a metaphor?

Shamans have developed very sophisticated techniques for dominion over energies that can range from the process of materialization-dematerialization, to the domain of the mood states of the people, to the induction of thoughts through dreams, etc. These functions, that escape from our Western education, integrate the subconscious space of our psyches. The manipulation of these is much more effective in us, so much so that we ignore their existence. As such, a very well-developed art of seduction exists that consists of creating very pleasant unconscious associations (or the opposite) in the mind of the subject with regards to a particular person. The neurological circuits for pleasure are managed by a shaman using olfactory stimulants, sound and subliminal gestures that induce an extraordinary empathy in the chosen person. These techniques, like the famous love potions, principally serve to attract the desired person for sexual purposes. But this induced empathy can allow the other person to be deprived of other benefits as well. In their ignorance of these practices and in the arrogance of power, Westerners considerably underestimate these occult powers and are for this reason the perfect victims.

Deceits and misunderstandings: expansion of consciousness or inflation of the ego?

These misunderstandings are also established regarding the intention of the shamanic process. Everyone agrees that the being is one, although the Westerner begins from the head and the indigenous person from the body. While the native seeks purification of the body to access wellbeing, the Westerner longs above all to “see” in order to feel good. The Westerner wishes to understand with the mind to satisfy concerns and to find the peace that is principally the peace of their restless mind. For an inhabitant of the Amazon, existential anguish concerns balance with nature and the invisible world, the capacity to develop physical work to maintain self-sufficiency. If the body is purified, then he knows that his head will also work better, he will have dreams and the spirits will approach him. When a person takes Ayahuasca, the shaman will ask if vomiting has occurred, because the physical purification signals in some way the success of the session. For the Westerner, it is the absence of vision that generates frustration because that is essentially what is expected. We operate in a world of images, reflections, screens...

On the other hand, apart from the shaman, the intake of Ayahuasca was a relatively rare occurrence in most ethnic groups and was generally secondary compared to the intake of purgative plant preparations. The latter are considered essential to balance the intake of Ayahuasca and young indigenous have systematic access to

these, though they do not always take Ayahuasca at all. The repeated and frequent intake of Ayahuasca without the intake of other plants does not make sense in the eyes of the indigenous person, and entails a certain danger.

There are then multiple traps in the approach to Amazonian shamanism by Westerners because misunderstandings can lead to incorrect behavior. Even in an ideal context and with an absolutely correct shaman, lack of preparation at the time of entering the symbolic universe can cause serious problems. In fact, the images that emerge, just as in dreams, require a degree of interpretation and then a conscious metabolisation. For the indigenous person who lives within a tribe, the cultural knowledge received from childhood provides him with a lecture key for reading shamanic experiences. He possesses a cosmogony of collective interpretations, legends, myths, family or clan stories that allow him to automatically localize his experience and provide coherence to it in relation to himself and his universe of reference. By contrast, the impoverished symbolism of Western rational education, the reductionism of scientific myth and the desacralization of religious practices, produce people deprived of clear reference points for their inner worlds, as well as for all transcendent dimension. The disappearance of rites of passage "produces" masses of adults who are not psychically born and remain blocked in a maternal world in which masculine psychic functions are excluded and become inaccessible. The ego with its ambition of omnipotence immediately takes advantage of shamanic experiences to appropriate them: the enlargement of consciousness then becomes an inflation of the ego. The subject takes a personal indication as the revelation of a unique divine mission. How many Westerners who take Ayahuasca and visualize energy in their hands immediately believe that they are called to become healers or even think that they were already before, without knowing it?

Did you say "magical thinking"? But this is magic!

In Western people, the processes of reification are a constant temptation, as they somehow permit the "objectification" of what is of symbolic nature and as such separated from the dimension of sense, when the latter is unpleasant. It is in this way that intentionality plays an essential role in any shamanic experience and is furthermore expressed in a ritual form that is precise and rigorous. But very quickly Westerners who have "discovered" shamanic practices have believed that they could keep the psychoactive substances "free" of the ritual norms. It is in this way that the initiators of the psychedelic movement of the sixties have thrown a whole generation into drugs. On the contrary, Westerners will try to place the pragmatic information that does not coincide with their principles into a "symbolic" denominated territory that is actually virtual. Symbolism in us Westerners is so empty that its essence no longer has any operative function and instead is converted into a reflection of a virtual reality. As an example, many feminists feel relegated to second place by the fact that according to the curanderos a woman cannot drink Ayahuasca when she is having her period, and they prefer to read this information as a remnant of the chauvinism of primitive tribes or through a psychoanalytic reading around the question of desire. So, they will have a tendency to transgress a very important recommendation that specifically concerns the fact that the effluvia of menstrual blood are toxic at an energetic level, a fact that can be easily demonstrated. It is also in this way that white people intellectualize to the extreme and see "magic" (the famous "magico-religious pre-logical" thinking so dear to anthropology) in what the Indigenous only considers as concrete and verifiable mechanisms of energy transfer. Who is under the control of "magical thinking"?

Other cultural elements that characterize the tribal world still need to be developed and can be a source of incomprehension between the Indigenous and Westerners. The frankness of Westerners will almost always be perceived as an aggression on the part of an Indigenous person, whose cultural inability to say "no" will be seen as hypocrisy by Western visitors. How can one explain in a few words that friendship between a man and a woman does not exist in a tribal context? A well-intentioned Western woman who kindly accepts a gesture of courtesy from an Indigenous man is in fact telling him that she is sexually available.

Therefore, we can understand how so many misunderstandings regarding intention, purpose, ritual form, symbolic interpretation, human relationships, rules of politeness, etc. complicate extraordinarily the approach to shamanism and that there is no place for naivety. And if for reasons of convenience of language, we have



used the word "indigenous", we must remember that this cultural impregnation remains today even in the large cities of South America and in people who are completely culturally mixed.

The doors of reconciliation

Nonetheless, we believe that this encounter is possible and can be mutually beneficial if it is framed with necessary precautions and undertaken slowly. Which is usually not the case. Shamanism requires long periods of training that few Westerners are truly willing to undertake, given the requirements and duration (years, full time). We are here facing the question of vocation. To say that "everyone has a shaman within himself" is a joke, and, at worst, a lie. Vocational callings are rare, as there are very few people who have a "Mozart or a Modigliani within themselves". Nowadays, although years of training are required to become an expert on the subject, we are surprised to see that one can become a shaman and master the states of consciousness with only one weekend of training in the Fontainebleau forest. Many of the so-called shamanism courses offered in the *New Age* context actually only appeal to techniques of relaxation, open-eyed sleep, induction of hypnotic states, etc., things that share only a name with shamanism. Shamanism engages the body in an extreme way (fasting, sexual abstinence, food prohibitions, prolonged isolation, etc.), directed to the borders of psychological resistance that exist especially within modified states of consciousness, bringing us closer to paranormal phenomena and parapsychological deviations that are sometimes too destabilizing, as well as opening the doors to unknown transcendental dimensions. Suffice to say that shamanic training involves a great deal of suffering and sacrifice. We are very far from the comfortable proposals of shamanic *light* training available at home that do not involve suffering (a horrible Judeo-Christian invention) where all that is needed is a partner and a drum to become a shaman and find your totem animal...

Initiation is a long and slow process that requires the integration of experiences at various levels (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual) and in which a Westerner cannot simply ignore their own culture. Instead of escaping to another world, it is about reintegrating one's own roots and reconciling with oneself and one's "ancestors", which, for a Westerner, also means recovering Judeo-Christian cultural foundations. Diverting through an ancestral culture may be appropriate for a Westerner on the condition that they are preparing to return "home". The prior or simultaneous acquisition of a training in accompaniment or, better said, of a profession that includes a therapeutic dimension, seems essential to me. The shamanic experience must be prepared beforehand, to then be conducted in a symbolic container and finally to be followed by additional stages of integration of the lived experience. Therefore, it requires a specific space.

In these conditions, the Spirit, who breathes where it wants and when it wants, can inspire therapeutic vocational callings, which may originate from different cultures, but which all speak of the eternal Man.